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ABSTRACT

Literature reviews have indicated there is a lack of data on public relations curriculum development for communication and business departments. Observations have been reported of "spectacular" growth in public relations courses in communication (Grunig, 1989). The first multi-disciplinary survey (3,201 college and university catalogs) of public relations courses listed by departments establishes communication departments offer nearly twice as many courses designated as public relations (indicated by title or course description) as do business or journalism departments. These courses fit as closely as the public relations courses offered in journalism the "ideal" curriculum model proposed by the 1987 joint commission study by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and the Public Relations Society of America on the design of an undergraduate program of study. While controversy remains on the suitability of communication or journalism to adequately support a public relations curriculum, there is clear evidence that without a tremendous dislocation of resources and faculty, business departments have neither the interest nor the track record in public relations curriculum development. Future public relations curriculum development will be led by communication departments, and the lack of knowledge about each other's disciplines needs to be facilitated in some major way. (Author/SG)

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THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS:

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

Literature reviews have indicated there is a lack of data on public relations curriculum development for communication and business departments. Observations have been reported of "spectacular" growth in public relations courses in communication (Grunig, 1989). The first multi-disciplinary survey (3,201 college and university catalogs) of public relations courses listed by department establishes communication departments offer nearly twice as many courses designated as public relations (indicated by title or course description). These courses fit as closely as the public relations courses offered in journalism the "ideal" curriculum model proposed by the 1987 joint commission study by AEJMC and PRSA on the Design of an Undergraduate Program of Study. While controversy remains on the suitability of communication or journalism to adequately support a public relations curriculum, there is clear evidence that without a tremendous dislocation of resources and faculty, business departments have neither the interest nor the track record in public relations curriculum development. Future public relations curriculum development will be led by communication departments and the lack of knowledge about each other's disciplines needs to be facilitated in some major way.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS:

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

Some consider public relations research an oxymoran. Historically, public relations is viewed from a practitioner role and is seen as an applied area. Admittedly research was sparse 15 years ago but current research output is flourishing, due in some part to the spectacular growth of public relations as a field of study along with having two research publications devoted specifically to public relations, Public Relations Review and Public Relations Annual, including the first scholarly text on theory--Public Relations Theory.

Public relations curriculum development in the field of communication (interpersonal, organizational, public communication, and speech) has been observed as "spectacular" (Grunig, 1989)1 and documented per department for all disciplines in a national survey of university and college catalogs (Neff, 1989).2 In this article, new knowledge is contributed to fill a gap which was recently noted in a review of the literature as "no data on public relations programs in speech or business . . . ." (Grunig, 1989)3 Therefore, the unique contribution of the following research establishes for the first time:

1. a comparative basis for examining curriculum development for all disciplines offering public relations on the undergraduate level;
2. a course level analysis for assessing widely held beliefs by researchers on program development; and
3. a content analysis of the established curriculums to suggest directions for future theory development, a critical factor for serious academic maturation within a discipline.

Moving Toward a Multi-discipline Perspective

The critical need for establishing a multi-discipline approach to public relations was most dramatically cited in Chicago at a June 1989 annual meeting of the national accrediting body for public relations, the Accrediting Council for Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) in Chicago. The accrediting council was reviewing documents submitted by the Council on Post Secondary Accreditation (COPA) in regard to the petition by the International Communication Association (ICA) on admitting communication departments to the accreditation process. COPA responded to each of ICA's major points and then summarized the lack of knowledge about the communication discipline by stating:

Does anyone know anything-- about this world of speech communication?4

The ensuing dialogue at the annual council meeting of ACEJMC further established the confusion in terminology among the disciplines. The Council was unaware of the recent evolution of speech communication to simply communication, for example. Mention was made that "speech" has been dropped from all regional professional associations which are now Central States Communication Association, Western States Communication Association, Southern States Communication Association, and Eastern Communication Association. True, it will be a few years before SCA becomes the American Communication Association, although the 1988 proposal for name change was only defeated by a narrow margin. The word "speech" unfortunately lingers for those outside of the discipline as the distinguishing feature of nonjournalism communication. Meanwhile, those in the discipline have designated "speech" in most instances as a subcategory such as a track or sequence in the overall communication discipline.

The opinions of department chairs during the following interviews for this study revealed an informal designation of "s" as specifying mass communications and the singular form of "communication" in the field of communication as oriented toward organizational, interpersonal, public communication, as well as the public relations curriculum developed in these programs. However, the review of the college and university catalogs did not verify the "s" as a systematic reference in curriculum development for either nonjournalism or the journalism public relations programs.

For the purposes of this article, "communication" will mean the field of study most representative of a focus on organizational, interpersonal, public, broadcasting, public relations, international and intercultural, the areas designated by the professional associations represented by the regional communication associations affiliated with the Speech Communication Association, the International Communication Association, and the World Communication Association. The plural version or communications will refer to mass communications or those in the specialized field of journalism. However, the classification of the departments followed the primary content emphasis of the discipline represented regardless of designation as singular or plural.

This research serves as a baseline study on the status of public relations as offered by universities and colleges--those programs found in undergraduate catalogs. The limitations of a curriculum review are noted: 1) course listings do not verify the quality of the teaching but does suggest whether the critical concepts and standards are acknowledged by a discipline and 2) the curriculum offered and the curriculum taught could vary. In regard to the gap between the catalog and the actual teaching, I offer the

following comment. Universities have been sued because what was offered was not taught. Perhaps in view of the legal issues, one should assume that the college and university course listings must reflect the classroom offering or suffer great punitive consequences.

PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES OFFERED BY DEPARTMENTS.

Background. Walker's study on "Status and Trends in Public Relations Education 1981" first suggested the growth of public relations programs in communication, indicating a trend away from journalism.5 In a survey of 256 colleges and universities with a 51.5 per cent response, journalism accounted for fewer than half the programs. Another trend noted at this time was a tendency toward an increased mix of disciplines in public relations programs.

The research presented here is a review of 3,201 university and college catalogs with 580 undergraduate departments listing public relations courses. At least 1,265 undergraduate public relations courses were taught in departments of communication, journalism, mass communication, public relations, business, including a miscellaneous category for the few departments which did not fit in the above categories.6 The criteria for course selection was based on the guideline provided by the 1987 joint AEJMC and PRSA Commission study which stated: public relations must appear in the course title or course description.7

The review of the courses offered by the 580 departments supported the observed "spectacular" growth of public relations in communication departments. Of the 580 departments listed, 41% of the departments were in communication, 21% in journalism, 17% in business, 8% in interdisciplinary, 7% in mass communication, 4% identified as miscellaneous departments, and 2% designated public relations departments.

Most of these departments were found in colleges or schools of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Business departments were the only exception and these departments were most frequently located in community colleges with no school or college designation or were located in a College of Business.

The courses that were designated as public relations either in the title or course description numbered 1,265 for the 580 departments. The number of courses listed per department type is outlined in the table below:

TOTAL PER CENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES
GENERATED BY DEPARTMENT TYPE

Department Offered	Departments (Total 580)	Courses (Total 1,265)
Communication	41%	43%

Journalism	21%	22%
Business	17%	10%
Interdisciplinary	8%	9%
Mass Communication	7%	9%
Miscellaneous	4%	4%
Public Relations	2%	4%

Only the internship course was the exception to the rule. In the internship course the following guidelines was followed:

> The internship course is frequently listed generically (no mention of public relations). Internships in these cases . . . are discussed in the overview of the department section and indicate the internship is a public relations experience. Furthermore, the internship course, while not mentioning public relations in the title or description, will be listed as part of the public relations program (labelled as a sequence, concentration, option, emphasis, or track) indicating the internship has a public relations orientation. Therefore, those internships which are generic, not mentioning public relations, are coded as public relations if references in course requirements or the departmental overview state a public relations experience is offered . . . .[8]

There is a powerful reason for addressing fully the course selection issue. At this point, the fact that courses clearly oriented to public relations were being offered identified formally a body of curriculum previously unavailable to scholars. The specific form used to gather the data is attached to the appendix, including a sample of the pages xeroxed from the catalog for each department. Furthermore, utilizing common standards established by the multi-disciplinary AEJMC-PRSA commission for course selection allowed a basis for comparison with previously agreed upon criteria.

The review of literature reports that the observed practice for curriculum development in public relations has been to offer <u>two</u> courses designated as public relations with the remainder of the course of study supplemented by courses offered outside of public relations. The survey of the college catalogs establishes that the situation may be better than observed. The following data on the average number of courses listed per department pushes beyond <u>two</u> courses for communication, journalism, mass communication, public relations, and interdisciplinary departments. Note, however, that communication and journalism departments listing public relations courses are more plentiful than the remaining department types. Thus departments offering more than <u>two</u> courses with a high level of course offerings have

more seriously dedicated courses of study or programs in public relations.

Table: Average Number of Courses Offered[9]

Per Department Type

Type of Dept	No of Depts	Average No of Courses per dept
Communication	240	2.28 courses
Journalism	123	2.33 courses
Business	99	1.24 courses
Interdisciplinary	43	2.78 courses
Mass Communication	38	2.90 courses
Miscellaneous	23	1.50 courses
Public Relations	14	3.50 courses

Although more business departments offer public relations courses than either mass communication, public relations, interdisciplinary or miscellaneous departments, the low total number of courses taught by business reduces the average of courses per department greatly. Following the criteria established by the 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Education in Public Relations, business departments are documented as not having "programs" in public relations. Similarly, the far fewer miscellaneous departments offering public relations (example would be an English department) would be offering generally one course per department. Both business and miscellaneous departments are viewed at this point as not having serious public relations programs.

The literature review suggests that there are strong arguments for public relations to be placed outside of either journalism or communication departments and be placed into business departments. The argument being that the critical orientation to a successful public relations program is an emphasis on management. Noting further that journalism stresses an independent stance from management to maintain an ethical relationship and thus such an attitude seriously hampers the role of the public relations professional (Grunig, 1989). Others argue that the "management" orientation, per se, is limiting. That the public relations professional is headed for another technician role similar to the entry level graphics or news release writing job. That management is not the decision making level and what we have created is yet another, although more sophisticated, level of technicians. That if we truly wanted to create public relations professionals that would have a leadership role, creative leadership, not management, would be the critical area of development (Covey, 1989). In a different respect, communication

departments are said to hinder public relations professional development by their orientation toward persuasion. Those outside of the communication field are quite vocal on the serious ethical questions a persuasion orientation causes. Yet those who come from a communication orientation are equally strong in stating that the area of "ethics" is strongly developed and is strongly woven into the fabric of persuasion. Furthermore, those in the communication discipline would note the vast development of theory beyond persuasion which focuses of organizational, interpersonal, public communication, and public relations per se. This reveals another gap in perception between disciplines involved in the development of public relations programs.

A closer examination of the course patterns into course types and sequences would provide some clue to how the curriculum has developed within each discipline. Although more public relations courses are designated as public relations than reported in previous research, the frequency and orientation of these courses will provide further evidence for what the future may hold for public relations professionals.

Concentration of Courses: Types and Sequences

Presently PRSA has passed a proposal requiring schools having newly established Public Relations Society of America chapters to have 5 courses designated as public relations. Existing programs have 3 years to comply with this new requirement. Already one can see the importance of having a public relations concentration, particularly for offering students professional opportunities. The potential for the different department types to meet this guidelines is established by the review of the university and college catalogs and is identified in the table below.

NUMBER OF DEPARTMENTS OFFERING

A TYPE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS SEQUENCES*

	Number of Courses					
Department Type:	0	1	2	3	4	5**
Communication	0	108	54	36	21	21
Journalism	0	48	33	15	15	13
Business	0	87	9	2	1	1
Interdiscip	0	12	13	9	6	5
Mass Comm	0	12	6	7	3	9
Miscellaneous	0	16	3	3	1	0
Public Relations	3*	2	3	0	2	3

*A "0" means 3 departments called public relations offered a public relations sequence but no courses were found with either public relations in the title or in the course description. In other words, these departments offered public relations sequences or tracks or majors with courses coming from various areas of concentration but none with a specific focus on public relations.
**Number of departments offering five or more course in public relations.

The data established that those department types which qualify are primarily those found in communication and journalism. Far fewer sequences of 5 or more courses in public relations are found in mass communication, interdisciplinary, public relations and in only 1 department out of 99 business departments offering public relations. The suggestion for public relations to be located in business department by previous literature reviews is suggesting a tremendous change in the status quo. A change which is unlikely to be supported by the realities of current curriculum development in public relations.

However, there is an even more serious task at hand. The concentration of courses by content is even more critical to the determination of programming standards. Here the ideal standards outlined in the 1987 Commission report are those agreed upon by both academicians and practitioners. The Commission study, for example, established six subject matter areas, NOT COURSES, should be represented in a public relations program. These subject matter areas covered:

Principles: Practices and Theory of Public Relations
PR Techniques: Writing, Message Dissemination, Networks
PR Research for Planning and Evaluation
PR Strategy and Implementation
Supervised PR Experience
Specialized Advanced Study[11]

The fit between the content course sequences in a department and the Commission program standards would sharpen the focus more precisely on the potential for public relations program development in the next decade. Note the table extends the 5-course sequence or subject area to include the Commission's recommended sixth area. The Commission study reiterates that the key to a quality public relations program in meeting programming standards is determined by the content of the course offering found in a sequence. The model program outlined in the table below shows the fit between the reality (courses listed currently) and ideal (best course combination suggested by academic and practitioner from Commission survey) in public relations education.

Model Curriculum Fit
(courses coverage for content area per department type)

	Princ	Tech	Resear	Strat	Super	Recomm
COM240	93%	32%	8%	21%	46%	11%
JOU124	95%	43%	3%	28%	41%	11%
BUS100	69%	6%	0%	3%	8%	28%
INT45	100%	49%	18%	22%	33%	11%
MAS37	103%	33%	5%	49%	64%	15%
MIS23	113%	4%	0%	22%	4%	0%
PR13	78%	54%	23%	23%	46%	23%

While the 240 communication(s) departments did not cover each of the course content areas fully, more courses fit the model curriculum than the other departments offering public relations courses. The small percentage of difference in favor of journalism for the principles, technique, and strategy content areas were more then offset in favor of communication by the greater number of communication departments offering public relations courses.

The analysis of 580 departments listings in public relations courses suggests future program development in public relations curriculum will be most likely led by the communication departments. There would have to be a tremendous upheaval of resources and dislocation of faculty to accommodate any suggestion that public relations should be located in business departments. Furthermore, the concept of a "management" orientation as being the "ideal" focus for the pubic relations professional has not been established satisfactory in the existing literature.

Summary

The research serves as baseline data for a future longitudinal study. Depending on financial resources available, a second analysis of the university and college catalogs should take place within two years. Already a brief perusal of the catalogs indicates significant changes are underway and these changes are strengthening the public relations course offerings as a distinct track or sequence.

The findings establish communication departments as providing major leadership in public relations curriculum development surpassing the traditional offerings in journalism departments. The analysis of the sequencing and the fit of course types to the model content areas suggested by the 1987 Commission survey of practitioners and professionals further establishes communication departments as offering curriculum development leadership in public relations. The review of university and college catalogs does not support any significant movement toward public relations course development in business departments.

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